

His life is one for the books

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I know some people collect thousands of hubcaps, or 2,700 pairs of shoes, or hundreds of sets of salt-and-pepper shakers. But I imagine they keep their obsessions in order, in a garage or closet or one corner of their otherwise conventional lives. The only corners of John Printz's home without books are those with radiators.

Away from home, he unpacks and checks in new books for Wayne State University's libraries, a job he's had for 22 years. On Saturdays, making the rounds of Detroit's used-book stores, he buys paperbacks and hardbacks, most of them inexpensive. He spends perhaps \$125 each week — or about \$6,500 a year of his \$32,000 salary.

"I'm interested in about 100 topics," he says, but concentrates on this odd mix: Bible history. Ancient history. Philosophy. The classics. Opera. And, the history of motor-car racing.

He carries the books back to his one-bedroom house near Grand River and Greenfield and sets them down, in an order only he discerns. He reads some, or parts of some, and parts of some over and over again. Albert Schweitzer's "Quest of the Historical Jesus" required almost 10 years' effort to comprehend, he admits. And, he has reread the Gospel of Mark at least 1,000 times, from the 300-some Bibles he owns, many in languages he doesn't know.

For relief, he reads modern fiction — Hammett, Chandler, LeCarre — and nearly anything else he hears people talking about, although he's often disappointed.

He reads in an old wooden office chair in the kitchen, although he must first clear its lap of books. Or, he reads in bed, cushioned by a single thin pillow, surrounded by a wall of books three feet high.

A passion for knowledge

He can explain his mania only this way: Books offer knowledge, for which he has always hungered. Since second grade he knew he was different. In high school, he read Spinoza, Voltaire, Gibbon, while other kids goofed off. His own grades plummeted as he spun off in other directions to learn.

"When I was a kid, I realized a man of knowledge was a rarity, and I thought it would be noble to become one. But I've had to wake up to the fact that people really aren't interested in knowledge.

"So you do it for yourself. To other people, it doesn't mean anything."

He earned a degree in history from Wayne State. And, for a few years, he was married. She left in 1978, for reasons only partly to do with his books. Once she was gone, though, books took over.

They engulfed the red couch, surrounded and obscured every table, climbed up the walls like vines. In each room, the stacks along the edges are neat, but books bought more recently are mounded in the middle in misshapen cardboard boxes.

"I never used the furniture anyhow," he shrugs. "To read, I need nothing more than a chair."

He owns no TV, and eats all meals out. Books block his avocado refrigerator,

which he last used about 15 years ago and which may, he guesses, still contain a beer or two brought over by a woman. He doesn't drink, never has. Books fill his kitchen sink, and all the floor space in his bathroom. The tub and sink and toilet are usable, but brown with 20 years' grime.

Cooking and cleaning take time.

The Ping-Pong table in the basement on which he used to play is sagging with thousands of books. Books teeter atop the washer, dryer and laundry tubs. The basement and attic steps are passable only if you are nimble and press your palms against the walls to keep from tumbling. Thousands more books weigh down the attic.

A self-contained universe

He likes his home, and travels only to auto races, having witnessed every Indy 500 for the past 37 years. Otherwise, he never leaves the city.

"Emerson said travel is a fool's paradise," he says. "I wouldn't go quite so far. But I know some people who go to see the Parthenon, and they come back with no idea what they looked at, or who built it. I say to them, 'Did you know the Parthenon was built with stolen money?' And they look at me kind of funny, and I say, 'You should read Thucydides on the Peloponnesian Wars, and they're rather in a state of shock.'"

He's proud of what he's learned, and at what a bargain. "The universe is all here," he says, raising his bushy eyebrows in wonder. "Anything that's known has been recorded in a book, so you've got the whole world at your feet."

But standing in a footprint in his kitchen, with no place to sit or even lean, he seems a lonely man, isolated by a moat filled with old words by dead men on dry pages.

When I ask him about regrets, he seems flustered by my failure to understand.

"I am gainfully employed. I have had the same job for 22 years. I do not get angry. I do not get depressed. And I would not trade places with anyone else in the world.

"I have only one desire: to know more."

I think: If John Printz had money and privilege, perhaps he would hire someone to keep his obsession in order, to build more bookcases, to add a wing to the house, to make people like me feel more at ease. Instead, Printz spends all his time and all his money buying what he loves, wallowing in it, and to hell with control.

So his books pile up. So what? So far, they have not crushed him.

As the evening winds down, Printz does not push me out. He will talk for hours, if I'd like to listen, about all that he knows.

When I leave, he leads me cautiously to the door. He steps into the cold on the porch to give me room to put on my coat. Then I squeeze out and into the vast world again, where almost everybody keeps tight control of their timid hungers, while he steps back inside with his books.

Susan Ager appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

HE'S ONE FOR THE BOOKS

Gingerly, I step into John Printz's home.

I turn sideways to squeeze past the front door. It opens only halfway because behind it are stacks of books. Beyond it are stacks of books. Everywhere I can see are piles of books — three, four, five feet high.

He has dropped his coat onto a nose-high pile in the vestibule, the hall closet having been long ago blocked shut by books. I drop mine there, too.

Now what? No passageways exist among the books. Instead, I hike my skirt and lift one leg very high, over cardboard boxes of Austen and Dreiser and Sagan and Elmore Leonard, dropping my shoe into what tiny foot space I can find.

Printz leads, teetering as he vaults from



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footprint to footprint. I do, too, knowing one stumble would trigger an avalanche.

"I don't move around the house much," says Printz, who is 51 and lives alone. "I only have to get into it once a day."

Ask him to diagnose his condition, and he says instantly, "Bibliomania!" then laughs with delight. He is a man who once kept his library neatly on shelves, but who over 20 years has let books engulf his furniture, his home and his life.

"You are the first person in here in eight years.

"I have no friends," he says without remorse. "I've found I can't learn anything from talking to people. People say things, but it adds up to nothing." Nor does he want friends. "They take time. And time is precious if you're trying to learn."

His last visitor was a census-taker, who asked a few quick questions and fled. "I'm not a normal person. And this," he nods at his books, "doesn't make any sense to people."

At first, it makes no sense to me, either. How can someone be so shockingly out of control? Who is this man I'm following deeper into a trap of books?

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John Printz's house in Detroit is stacked with books, books and more books.